

## CLAIMS

We Claim:

1. A method for preventing the formation of watermark defects in a semiconductor process, the method comprising:  
    patterning a silicon oxynitride layer; then  
    conditioning the patterned silicon oxynitride layer;  
and then  
    performing a wet clean step in the presence of the  
    conditioned silicon oxynitride layer.
2. The method of Claim 1, wherein the conditioning step comprises densifying the patterned silicon oxynitride layer.
3. The method of Claim 1, wherein the conditioning step comprises a rapid thermal anneal in the presence of oxygen.
4. The method of Claim 3, wherein the rapid thermal anneal is performed for about 20 seconds at a temperature of about 900°C.
5. The method of Claim 1, wherein the conditioning step comprises a rapid thermal anneal in the presence of nitrogen.
6. The method of Claim 1, wherein the conditioning step comprises a high-density oxygen-plasma treatment performed at a temperature in the range of about 300 to 400°C.
7. The method of Claim 6, wherein the high-density oxygen-plasma treatment is performed in an oxygen flow of about 50 standard liters per minute (slpm) or higher.

8. The method of Claim 7, wherein the high-density oxygen plasma treatment is performed at a pressure of about 5.5 Torr.

9. The method of Claim 1, wherein the condition step is performed by heating the patterned silicon oxynitride layer in a furnace in the presence of oxygen.

10. The method of Claim 1, wherein the condition step is performed by heating the patterned silicon oxynitride layer in a furnace in the presence of nitrogen.

11. The method of Claim 1, further comprising:

forming a pad oxide layer over a semiconductor substrate;

forming a silicon nitride layer over the pad oxide layer; and

forming the silicon oxynitride layer over the silicon nitride layer.

12. The method of Claim 11, further comprising:

forming a photoresist layer over the silicon oxynitride layer; and

exposing the photoresist layer through a reticle, wherein the silicon oxynitride layer operates as an anti-reflective coating during the exposure;

developing the exposed photoresist layer, thereby forming a photoresist mask having an opening.

13. The method of Claim 12, further comprising etching the silicon oxynitride layer, the mask layer, the pad oxide and the semiconductor substrate through the photoresist mask, thereby forming a trench in the semiconductor substrate.

14. The method of Claim 13, further comprising:  
stripping the photoresist mask; and then  
performing the conditioning step.

15. The method of Claim 14, further comprising thermally  
growing a liner oxide layer in the trench after performing the  
wet clean step.

16. The method of Claim 15, further comprising depositing  
an insulating material over the liner oxide layer.

17. The method of Claim 16, further comprising performing a  
chemical-mechanical polishing (CMP) step to remove portions of  
the insulating material, the conditioned silicon oxynitride  
layer, and portions of the silicon nitride layer.

18. The method of Claim 1, further comprising using  
hydrogen fluoride (HF) in the wet clean step.

19. The method of Claim 1, wherein the wet clean step  
comprises a buffered oxide etch (BOE).